As a keen radio broadcaster, I’ve been responsible for producing and presenting the monthly Cancer Research UK podcast for several years. Moving from audio to video, my colleagues in the press team and I thought about having regular Google Hangouts – live webcasts that are then uploaded onto YouTube – as a way of creating multimedia content and exploring topical issues, but were unsure of how best to tackle the technical and logistical challenges involved.

Luckily for us, Dr Buddhini Samarasinghe came to work in our Research Communications and Engagement team. As part of the ‘Science on Google+’ community – a group of scientists who are passionate about communicating science to the public – she has been responsible for hosting Google Hangouts on Air (HOA) on a range of topics and was keen to get Cancer Research UK involved.

What did we do?
We decided to cover one of the hottest topics in cancer research: immunotherapy. Our guests were to be Professor Fran Balkwill from Barts Cancer Institute and Professor Ben Willcox from the University of Birmingham, UK – and after much diary-wrangling we fixed a date.

In the fortnight before the live event, Buddhini did test Hangouts with both the guests and myself, to make sure the technology was working. This flagged up a problem with Fran trying to connect over her institutional network – something that can be an issue with organisation-wide online security – and gave us some time to find a solution, rather than finding out on the day itself.

Next, we planned the areas we wanted to cover and provided Ben and Fran with our proposed questions in advance. To promote the Hangout we drummed up interest on Google+, Facebook and Twitter (@CR_UK) with eye-catching banners, tracking mentions with the hashtag #CRUKHOA.

Finally, we live-tweeted key quotes from our guests while the Hangout was on air, following up with a blog (http://bit.ly/CRUKHangoutBlog) and social media posts to showcase the YouTube video. We also set up a short survey asking for feedback and suggestions on how to improve future Hangouts.

Was it a success?
We think so! The 25-minute broadcast flew by, and we covered a lot of important points without getting lost in technical jargon. Here are a few stats:

- We’ve received some great comments, including: “This was brilliant, thanks” from a patient undergoing immunotherapy for mesothelioma; “Many thanks for the Hangout… [I’ll be] able to take some comments along to [my husband’s] consultant. Thank you for sharing your research and information. One grateful wife xxx” and “It was really awesome… I’m a 3rd year medical student [and] I loved it”.

What did we learn?
Based on what we learned this time around, here are our top tips for anyone interested in exploring Hangouts as a way of engaging people with research:

- Pick scientists who are great communicators, along with experienced hosts
- Promote widely on social media before and after the live event
- Prepare questions in advance and send them to your guests
- Check everyone’s set-up well ahead of time: each participant will need a computer with a webcam, microphone and headphones
- Get everyone online half an hour before the broadcast to iron out any last-minute technical issues and queries
- Make sure hosts can communicate privately during the Hangout to keep things moving along – we used the chat functionality in Google Docs
- Have two people live tweeting, to avoid missing key quotes

We’re now hoping to make Hangouts a regular part of our science communication activities and are already planning the next one, focusing on research into cancers affecting children and teens.

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